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AUTHOR Skopec, Eric
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ABSTRACT

The practical value of the systems approach to rhetoric may be enhanced by attending to distinctions between the various types of symbolic activities. One such distinction exists between popular discourse, understood as intentional communication, and theoretical or descriptive statements about such discourse. A second distinction is between pragmatic or technical treatises designed to instruct in speaking or writing, and speculative or descriptive treatises on the role of discourse in society. Also of concern are the relations which successive rhetorical systems bear to one another, and whether the development of rhetorical theory is additive or sweeping and radical. While the pragmatic/technical tradition has remained quite stable, the speculative/descriptive tradition has undergone frequent, substantial revision. Rhetoric is active and vital only when the subordinate traditions are interwoven in mutually supportive ways. Promising phenomena in the systems perspective include attention to the functions of discourse such as interpersonal adjustment and organizational communications, interest in the knowledge-building functions of discourse, and the growing understanding of the perceptual process, which offers support to the audience-centered theory of rhetoric. (DF)

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Rhetoric: Systems and Beyond

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Submitted by:
Eric Skopec
Syracuse University

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J. H. Plumb's observation that those who would control the present must also control the past is no less true of rhetorical scholars than of those whom they study.¹ Moreover, his remark serves as a useful way of reminding ourselves that the systems view of rhetoric popularized by Professors Ehninger and Scott is only one of several possible perspectives from which we might view rhetorical history. Well known alternatives include tracing the development of a single "unit idea" through the various treatises in which it finds expression--an approach popularized by Lovejoy; examining the place of rhetoric and its components in representative conceptual schemes--an approach which takes the conceptual scheme and not the social and political climate to be the context for rhetoric; describing the role and function of rhetoric in the thought of a single theorist--an approach which concentrates upon the contributions of individual theorists who merely happen to be situated in time and place; and studying the textual features which condition the expression of an idea--an approach which takes a single text to be the context of rhetoric. I mention these alternatives to emphasize the fact that the systems approach represents a particular reconstruction of our rhetorical past and that it should be judged by the same criterion to be employed in judging any symbolic reconstruction: its pragmatic value.

The essential characteristics of the systems perspective, as I understand it, are the following: (i) abandonment of the search for definitive attributes which characterize rhetoric in all its forms and guises; (ii) viewing history as a succession of distinct periods in which rhetoric answered to the social, political, and cultural demands of the era; and (iii) attempting to describe the conceptual relationships between social demands and rhetorical constructs in a manner which allows us to grasp the present shape and future prospect of rhetoric.

In what follows, I shall comment on each of these features in turn, but my thesis is that the pragmatic value of the systems approach may be enhanced by attending somewhat more closely to some distinctions between the various types of symbolic activities which rightly claim a share of our attention.

I

Historically, "rhetoric" has been used as it is now, to refer to a great number of different things. Consequently, I shall not dispute the claim that we "must experience the immediacy of a rhetorical milieu before working out a definition,"² but I will urge that we distinguish between some of the more common symbolic activities which comprise the "rhetorical milieu." First, I think it helpful to distinguish between popular discourse understood as "communication characterized by a high degree of intentionality" and theoretical or descriptive statements about such discourse. The distinction is neither new nor novel and we are fortunate to have a variety of ways of marking the difference. Bryant, to whose vocabulary I am partial, suggests that we juxtapose "discourse" and "rhetoric,"³ while Booth relies upon the typesetter to differentiate between "rhetoric" and "Rhetoric."⁴ Other pairs of terms which we might use as well include "practice" and "theory," "oratory" and "rhetoric," "artifact" and "art," "product" and "precept," "function" and "faculty," and "object" and "skill." Of course, not all of these oppositions are equally apt, and none of them draw a distinction without the risk of ambiguity. However, all point to a distinction which is easily recognized when we compare John Quincy Adams' Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory with his speeches on abolition or Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful with his speeches on conciliation with America,

Cicero's treatises with his orations, . . . But enough of this lest I try your patience. To forestall the objection that both discourse and rhetoric are symbolic activities, I shall merely add that they seem to be rather different activities and that our vocabulary ought to reflect that difference.⁵

A second distinction I would urge requires attention to characteristics of treatises within the rhetorical tradition, properly so called. Some treatises in all eras have attempted to provide instruction in the use of discourse while others have been content to describe or speculate about the role of discourse in society.⁶ Our vocabulary provides us fewer means of marking this distinction than the former one, but we ought to note it none the less. I find it convenient to use the terms "pragmatic" or "technical" to label treatises which propose to tell someone how to give speeches or compose essays and the terms "speculative" or "descriptive" to identify treatises which comment on the role of discourse in society. Others may find alternate terms to mark the differences, but they are none the less obvious when one compares characteristic treatise of each type. Illustrative contrasts result from comparing Cicero's de Oratore with de Inventione, Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric with his Lectures on Pulpit Eloquence, and Richard Weaver's Ethics of Rhetoric with his handbooks on composition. Some treatises have sought to bridge these aspects of the rhetorical tradition, but most have elected to hold them distinct because they appeal to different audiences. Again, it may be objected that both the pragmatic/technical and speculative/descriptive traditions represent symbolic activities which deserve our attention. And again, I agree but maintain that the activities are typologically different and ought to be distinguished. Moreover, observing the distinction will allow us to avoid spurious comparisons suggesting that classical

rhetoricians were concerned only with teaching others to speak while modern theorists seek to understand the whole of the rhetorical process.⁷

II

The second area of concern, on my reading, is the relationships rhetorics of successive systems bear to one another. Although I doubt that any of us is committed to either extreme, the polar cases and the objections to each are worth noting. On the one hand, we may maintain that the transitions from one system to the next are relatively mild affairs as new premises are introduced to correct deficiencies in the systems erected upon their predecessors. This view makes the development of rhetorical theory an additive process whereby the products of one era are added to those of the past epochs for the benefit of the future. This is rather like furnishing a room by selectively buying pieces which will fit into the established decor. On the other hand, we may view the progression as a more or less sweeping and radical process akin the shuffling of paradigms described by Kuhn in his account of scientific revolutions. Such a view characterizes the progression of systems as analogous to periodic redecorations in which rooms are repainted and even slightly used furniture is quickly consigned to the second hand store while a whole new ensemble bearing little evident relationship to the old is purchased.

Clearly both positions recognize that "rhetoric is by nature a time and culture-bound phenomena," but both are subject to a variety of objections. On the one hand, the evolutionary view is open to question because prominent theorists of each era depart substantially from their predecessors in such matters as classifications and orderings of speech components, descriptions of opportunities for discourse, relative emphases on the components of rhetorical situations, and fundamental principles exemplified in their treatises. Conversely, the revolutionary perspective is

bedevilled by the sempervirence of the classical tradition--a quality attributable to the variety of possibilities explored by classical theorists and their success in identifying pedagogical strategies which appear founded on the relatively stable characteristics of human symbolic behavior. Moreover, both positions are somewhat embarrassed by the fact that discarded doctrines frequently reappear in unexpected guises. For example, even the view associating rhetoric with courtly social activity has been resurrected by sociolinguistic theories maintaining that social behavior is governed by unspoken rules enforced by the groups adhering to them.

Of course, these difficulties are far from insurmountable and my own inclination is to resolve them by pointing to the distinction between the speculative/descriptive and pragmatic/technical traditions. Historically, I believe the rhetorical dimension least subject to change has been the pragmatic component. For example, the innovative theorists of the eighteenth century were able to explore new territory only because their educations had insured a solid foundation in accepted classical doctrines. Interestingly, Thomas Reid continued to indoctrinate his students in the mechanical features of classical rhetoric while his contemporaries used his theories as ramps from which to assault the inherited doctrines. Similarly, while many of us are searching for a "new" rhetoric, Kenneth Burke instructs us to recover the elements of rhetoric appropriated by the "new" sciences⁸ and other colleagues in English view classical rhetoric as a "positive discipline"⁹ and use its doctrines to teach students to "speak and write more effectively."¹⁰

Although the pragmatic/technical tradition has evidenced considerable stability, the speculative/descriptive tradition has witnessed frequent and substantial revisions. In fact, these revisions have been among the

most radical in intellectual history and almost seem to justify a revolutionary view of historical succession. It is to these revisions that Ehninger, Scott, and others have pointed, and I shall say nothing further on this score. However, it is worth observing that rhetoric is an active and vital force only when the subordinate traditions are interwoven in mutually supportive ways. Such, of course, is the ideal and we ought to envision a system in which contemporary discourses are reflected in the theoretical/descriptive literature and both are used as foundations for pragmatic/technical treatises. Unfortunately, we know that the situation has often been otherwise and I take the failure to achieve such integration to be the greatest shortcoming of the eighteenth-century system. As evidence of this failure, we may note--as Ehninger has done--that the "new" rhetoric of the enlightenment was an armchair product devoid of practical application. Witness the fact that while Campbell and his contemporaries emphasized description and vivacity, their practical advice falls short of Horace's and lacks the systematic enumerations offered ^{by} other classical authors. Another sign of the failure to achieve effective integration is the rapidity which such monumental classical summaries as Ward's System of Oratory and Lawson's Lectures Concerning Oratory found their way into oblivion.

I wonder if we are not now witnessing a similar failure in the fact, noted by Leff,¹¹ that current speculations about epistemic rhetoric have been devoid of practical applications. This conjecture, however, presages the argument of the concluding section of this essay. For the moment, I shall simply claim that one of the most critical functions of the speculative tradition is to provide rhetorically effective rationales for study of the pragmatic/technical tradition. This leads me to believe that the revolutionary character of some rhetorical systems results from efforts to

make traditional forms attractive in terms of the immediate interests and concerns of a society. At the same time, it suggests that the revolutionary character of the same systems arise from pragmatic concerns reflecting relatively stable elements of human nature.

III

Finally, I believe that the systems perspective offers considerable promise which has yet to be fully realized. I suspect we shall be better able to grasp the present and future conditions of rhetoric if we observe the distinctions I've urged. To illustrate my position, I shall comment on three phenomena which I take to be suggestive of future promise.

One of the most clearly marked phenomena of the last few decades is attention to the functions of discourse in contexts unanticipated by earlier rhetoricians. Obvious examples include interpersonal adjustment and organizational communication, and I suspect that most of us regularly teach classes focusing upon both. Of course, many of these classes have the character of "public speaking for . . ." (engineers, accountants, law students, and so forth), but others reflect genuinely expanded theoretical bases of the sociological character described by Ehninger. For example, efforts to differentiate organizational communication from more traditional forms have tended to emphasize the following organizational characteristics: social composition, collective goal orientation, differential functions, systems of coordination, and continuity of the unit.¹² These characteristics represent important contributions to the speculative/descriptive tradition and their influence upon the pragmatic/technical tradition is evident in some of the better texts currently on the market.

A second clearly marked speculative dimension is interest in the knowledge building functions of discourse. However, I share Leff's chagrin at the failure of contemporary theorists to secure practical appli-

cations for the epistemic claims. Here, perhaps more than in any other context, the systems perspective should make us aware of the critical disjuncture between the speculative interests of theorists and the technical concerns of practitioners. Without holding too strongly to the point, I suspect that progress will be more rapid if we mind our vocabularies. If I read them correctly, most of the scholars exploring epistemic claims have fused the notions of "discourse" and "rhetoric" in a manner which disguises the problem. That is, I think their claims read more precisely as "discourse is epistemic" than "rhetoric is epistemic." Such a rephrasing should help to keep clear the different sorts of symbolic activity involved and will remind us that we have yet to fulfill the demands of practitioners.

The last phenomena to which I would point is the growing sophistication in our understanding of the perceptual process resulting from inquiries initiated in the 1950's. Significantly, this sophistication offers promise of providing the theoretical foundation for an audience-centered rhetoric of the type for which Scott calls. Contemporary analyses of perception emphasize the active role of the perceiver in the perceptual process which encompasses the process employed in reception and interpretation of messages. Perception is said to be a complex, precognitive activity involving the selection, ordering, and interpretation of stimuli. When the stimuli are constituents of a message, the active nature of perception implies that an individual largely constructs the messages to which he consciously responds. As a correlary, we may note, the messages to which each individual in an audience is exposed will differ as prior experiences and mental states result in differing patterns of selecting, ordering and interpreting the stimuli generated by the speaker. Wholly theoretical rhetorics based on this analysis of the perceptual process recognize the role of an individual in constructing the communicative environment to

which he responds--a theme becoming central to some epistemic claims about rhetoric--while pragmatic/technical rhetorics elaborating on this foundation should provide rhetors with means of selectively altering the filtering processes employed by auditors.

END NOTES

- ¹ The Death of the Past (Boston: Macmillan, 1970), p. 17.
- ² "Colloquy I. A Synoptic View of Systems of Western Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 61 (1976), 439-447.
- ³ Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 39 (1953), 401-424.
- ⁴ Wayne C. Booth, "The Revival of Rhetoric," New Rhetorics, ed. by Martin Steinman, Jr. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), pp. 1-15.
- ⁵ For elaboration on this claim, the reader is directed to Maurice Natanson's "typology or hierarchical ordering of the different aspects of rhetoric," in "The Limits of Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 41 (1955), 133-139.
- ⁶ A similar distinction is the foundation of Douglas McDermott's argument in "George Campbell and the Classical Tradition," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 49 (1963), 403-409.
- ⁷ S.M. Halloran, "Tradition and Theory in Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (1976), 239 and passim.
- ⁸ Kenneth Burke, "Rhetoric--Old and New," New Rhetorics, ed. by Martin Steinman, Jr. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), pp. 59-76.
- ⁹ Edward P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. viii.
- ¹⁰ John H. Mackin, Classical Rhetoric for Modern Discourse (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. vii.
- ¹¹ Michael C. Leff, "In Search of Ariadne's Thread: A Review of Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory," Central States Speech Journal, 29 (1978), 73-91.
- ¹² L. W. Porter, E. E. Lawler, III, and J. R. Hackmann, Behavior in Organizations (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).